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2017

The legitimacy of elite gatekeeping

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Karen, David. 2017. "The legitimacy of elite gatekeeping." *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 40.13: 2263-2274.

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The legitimacy of elite gatekeeping

Abstract:

Natasha Warikoo's study of how students at Harvard, Brown, and Oxford Universities view race and fairness highlights the vast differences between the U.S. and Britain with respect to perceptions of meritocracy by these winners in the competition for places in elite institutions. The strict enforcement of uniform standards for admission is seen as critical and legitimate at Oxford, whereas a more holistic approach in the U.S. – one that sees racial diversity as an important and desirable part of the institution's culture and identity – is seen as critical to a "diversity bargain". I question the sources of students' ideas about race and the diversity bargain, suggesting that they may be rooted more in their pre-college experiences than in their life at university. I also raise questions about whether and how an admissions lottery would work to address some of Warikoo's concerns.

Keywords: Race, fairness, affirmative action, meritocracy, college admissions, elite colleges

THAT'S NOT FAIR!!! Kids seem to have some kind of confident, seemingly innate, sense of what is or isn't fair. But studies have shown that kids' ideas of fairness differ quite radically as they age and across different societies (Almås et al. 2010; Carson and Banuazizi 2008; Schäfer, Haun, and Tomasello 2015). By the time they get to college, students' senses of fairness also differ by race and place. Not only do they differ but they get remarkably complex. Indeed, when we ask college students about how rewards are and should be distributed in the larger society, they quickly begin to think about how family and class of origin, race and ethnicity, and achievement criteria of various sorts (academic, athletic, musical, theatrical, etc.) factor into allocation processes.

This is the terrain that Natasha Warikoo helps us navigate with her revealing study, *The Diversity Bargain: And Other Dilemmas of Race, Admissions, and Meritocracy at Elite Universities*. Warikoo, a professor of education at Harvard Graduate School of Education, examined Harvard, Brown, and Oxford University undergraduates' conceptions of the admissions processes at their respective institutions to uncover their underlying ideas about race, fairness, and meritocracy. Given the social inequality extant in the U.S. and Great Britain, Warikoo wanted to understand how the unquestioned winners in one of the society's most competitive sweepstakes view the role of race and merit in these ostensibly fair contests. Is it reasonable to ignore the applicants' vastly unequal K-12 educational opportunities and socioeconomic circumstances as they enter the admissions competition? Is it reasonable to consider issues of *identity* as relevant to a playing field that is supposed to be level and assessed based on past accomplishments? Essentially, Warikoo wishes to figure out how some of the likely future leaders of the U.S. and Great Britain – those who attend the countries' most elite universities – will view fundamental questions about the allocation of scarce resources: what *kinds* of merit or identity or context matter? Warikoo tries to decipher how these elite university students think about racial and ethnic diversity, merit, and, ultimately, fairness.

Warikoo's book builds on a series of debates – on the ground, in ivory towers, and in the courts – that have taken place about affirmative action, meritocracy, and fairness. The one constant across these debates has been the deep level of engagement across the political spectrum. On the right (at least some parts), any deviation from using the same standards for all applicants leads to claims of violations of equal rights and of the imposition of quotas. On the left (at least some parts), affirmative action is seen as ameliorative and should be applied across racial/ethnic and socioeconomic groupings so as to compensate for the vast inequalities in the pre-college educational system and in the society as a whole. As Warikoo emphasizes throughout, the debate about fairness is ultimately a debate about definitions of merit.

One of the most important differences between the U.S. Ivy League and Oxford has to do with what Harvard and Brown, on the one hand, are looking for among their applicants, and what Oxford is looking for, on the other. The Ivy League schools, sitting atop a private higher education system in the U.S., have remarkable autonomy in deciding their admissions criteria; Oxford, as a public institution, is far more constrained. Further, higher education institutions in the U.S., as Warikoo puts it, are “socially embedded” while those in Great Britain are “socially buffered”. Conceptions of merit are much more subject to contestation in the embedded situation than in the buffered situation. And, of course, we know that the U.S. pays much more attention to non-academic forms of merit than does Oxford. Ivy League institutions attempt to fill out their classes with adequate numbers of scholars but also wrestlers (light and heavy!), quarterbacks, point guards, and goalies, not to mention bassoonists, singers, and actors. Oxford admissions, on the other hand, is almost like a U.S. Ph.D. department, in which the professors play a huge role in determining who is admitted; the interview for admission focuses on the applicant's achievement in the given field (e.g. history, mathematics ...) under review.

Warikoo argues convincingly that there are two historical factors that critically differentiate the U.S. and British contexts. First, the British Labor Party focused much more on *directly* helping the working class rather than expecting education to play the role of social escalator (as in the U.S.); so, providing greater access to elite education was not central to its agenda. Second, the importance of slavery, discrimination, and exclusion along race lines has always been more central in the U.S. than in England.

Warikoo's short answer to the question of what role race and merit play in elite college admissions is twofold: 1. It's very different in the U.S. than in Great Britain; and 2. She finds that students have conjured a kind of bargain organized around their notions of diversity. In the U.S., white students (and, to a lesser extent, students of colour) at Harvard and Brown are willing to accept the use of race and ethnicity as consequential factors in the admissions process (affirmative action) because its use has led to a *diverse* university environment that will educate them and, ultimately, advantage them in a multicultural world. Obviously, for the white students who were interviewed, using race as a factor in admission did not disadvantage them and, as victors in the competition, they are willing to accept students who are not like them so they – the white students – can benefit from students' of colour contributions to the larger environment (especially if the students of colour are not upper-middle class). Specifically, white students are willing to accept that the admissions process works differently for students of colour – that there are *calibrated notions of merit* – so that, ultimately, the admitted group as a whole has greater “collective merit”. In Great Britain, the diversity bargain is quite different: students expected

race (and class) to play *no* specific role in the admissions process and, *therefore*, nonwhite students were considered entirely equal to whites. The irony here is that *using* race in the admissions process would lead to a questioning of the legitimacy of the increased presence of students of colour on campus, while *not using* race keeps the numbers of students of colour quite low but their legitimacy to be at Oxford is unquestioned.

Let me briefly review the outlines of Warikoo's study. Remarkably, Warikoo was able to navigate her way through the thickets of bureaucracy (and whatever Institutional Review Boards) at three of the most elite universities in the world to get access to students for face-to-face interviews. Warikoo trained graduate assistants to conduct interviews with 143 students between 2009 and 2011: 38 students each at Harvard and Brown (23 whites and 15 students of colour¹). At Harvard, there were nine Black and Latino students in the sample and six Asian-Americans. At Brown, there were eight Black and Latino students and seven Asian-American. In Appendix A, Warikoo provides individual-level data about each respondent. It is sometimes difficult to discern the race/ethnicity of each sample member, as the self-reported race/ethnicity of the interviewee differs somewhat from Warikoo's usage. For example, there were two "Chinese" students in the Harvard sample; the reader must assume that they are Asian-American. View all notes) another 67 (52 whites and 15 second-generation –that is, British-born children of immigrants–students) at Oxford. The interviews focused on students' perceptions of the degree to which their college was a meritocracy and whether and how its race and ethnic diversity affected their experiences. The questions attempted to ascertain why the students thought that students of colour – specifically, blacks and Latinos – were under-represented in the college population (relative to their percentage in the population at large) and whether they had experienced or witnessed prejudice or discrimination around race/ethnicity. Warikoo also attempted to elicit from her respondents their experience of positive aspects of a diverse racial/ethnic environment. The book would have benefited if she had focused more on class variation both in describing her respondents and in eliciting how social class informed conceptions of merit.

Warikoo's analysis of these interviews led her to discern four "race frames" among her respondents: colourblindness; diversity; power analysis; and culture of poverty. The frames represent different ways of seeing race. The *colourblindness* frame leads students to *not see* race; we are all individuals. It also may be linked to denying that race matters (or has mattered) in society – as in, "we're a post-racial society". The *diversity* frame sees race and ethnicity as positive aspects of campus life and considers race and ethnicity as important markers of group identity. Rooted in a multicultural perspective, the diversity frame highlights the ways that different worldviews and cultural practices become important characteristics of life in college. The *power analysis* frame is characterized by a group conflict model of social life: race and ethnic groups struggle for scarce resources and there are vast power differences among the groups. Students who hold a power analysis frame are often focused on working towards – fighting for – racial justice. The *culture of poverty* frame views the observed racial and ethnic disadvantage as rooted in the culture of the group. Whether it's the lack of a work ethic or an inability to defer gratification, this frame blames the group's cultural practices for its low status in society.

For Warikoo, race frames “shape the way students explain the underrepresentation of black students on campus, and what role, if any, they think their universities should play in changing that underrepresentation” (44). While this concept of race frames is central to the argument, Warikoo’s explanation and use of it is hard to follow. She usefully distinguishes between “frames” and “ideologies”, suggesting that the latter are “stickier” and less subject to institutional influences (227). But it would have been extremely useful to see how students’ race ideologies affect their race frames. To study this, an optimal research design would have required that students be contacted for participation before or on arrival at the institution, certainly a challenge. Warikoo still might have tried in her interviews to get a sense of students’ cultural meanings around race in a way that was deeper than their current race frames, especially since she wants to claim that their experience in college affects their current race frames. It is totally unclear how much of a student’s race frame is rooted in their experiences growing up and how much it is affected by their time on campus. Is there any self-selection going on? Do students with particular race ideologies orient to particular institutions and, subsequently, develop associated race frames? Further, while she acknowledges that students can and do hold multiple frames simultaneously, we get very little sense of how they articulate with one another. Does one frame consistently nudge out another? Is there an interaction among the strength of given frames, the student’s race, and the particular college the student attended? Since these frames “shape how we understand the world and act within it” (45), these are very important questions. Although Warikoo occasionally conveys the subtlety of some students’ complex racial visions, we lack a larger sense of how these frames act in concert within or between individuals, races, and institutions. It would have been fascinating to have learned more about how these frames are “layered” in students’ cultural toolkits.²² Warikoo suggests a kind of layering on page 60. View all notes

In her across-the-pond comparison, Warikoo discovered huge differences in race frames between the U.S. Ivy League students and the British Oxford students.³³ Calculated from the tables in Appendix A (203–209). View all notes Perhaps the largest difference is that U.S. students were much more likely to *have* a race frame than the British students: almost 1/3 of Oxford respondents had no race frame compared to only about 1/15 of Ivy League respondents. This may very well reflect the salience of race not only in elite university admissions but in the U.S. vs. Great Britain. Warikoo discovers again and again how focused are the U.S. students on issues of race and how much the British students insist that race and racism are not important issues there. In terms of the specific race frame chosen by Oxford respondents compared to U.S. respondents, the largest difference was in terms of attraction to the “culture of poverty” frame: almost eighteen per cent of Oxford students chose this frame compared to under seven per cent in the U.S. The other major difference was in the attraction of the U.S. students to the diversity frame: they were more than twice as likely to choose it as the Oxford students. Over 2/5 of Ivy League respondents had *two or more* race frames compared to about one of seven Oxford interviewees. Whether the lack of a race frame indicates relatively low salience or having multiple frames can be seen as a measure of complexity, I’m not sure and Warikoo doesn’t explore this in depth. I would certainly have been curious to see how the lack of a race frame plays out in terms of Warikoo’s other interests, especially with respect to students’ understandings of merit. After all, a key factor in Warikoo’s focus on race frames was because she claimed that “our conceptions of merit rest on our conceptions of race, inequality, and fairness” (9). So, what do we do with the one-third of Oxford respondents who didn’t have a race

frame? And, if one doesn't have a race frame, is one inclined at all to a "diversity bargain"? (Table 1)⁴⁴ I might ask in addition, are there other non-race-based types of diversity the students would be willing to bargain for? [View all notes](#)

Table 1. Race frames of U.S. and Oxford (Great Britain) students. [CSVDisplay Table](#)

Warikoo spent time at Brown and Harvard to determine if (and how) they had different approaches to race relations on campus. She found that Harvard has an integrationist approach to race, providing many opportunities for campus-wide discussions and experiences of racial and ethnic diversity. Brown, on the other hand, has an approach that focuses much more on providing space and resources for under-represented groups (primarily through the Third World Center and the Third World Transition Program) to explore their place on campus and to understand the contours of racial inequality on campus and beyond. Given these different campus foci, Warikoo expected differences in the race frames of the students on the two campuses. Even more, she expected relatively large differences between the students from under-represented minority groups from Brown and Harvard. Though she did find that all the (4) African-American students who attended the TWTP had a power analysis frame, one might have expected massive differences in the distribution of race frames between the Harvard and Brown students. Instead, we see Harvard and Brown students having *almost identical* distributions. Warikoo's claim that Harvard's and Brown's fundamentally different approaches to race relations on campus produces differences in students' race frames is inconsistent with the data. Table 2 summarizes the race frames of the Brown and Harvard white, black/latinx, and Asian-American students. From her qualitative data, it might be possible to argue that the texture and intensity of the race frames differed between the two campuses but Warikoo wishes to claim that the different institutional approaches produce different race frames. This does not seem to be the case.

Table 2. Race frames of Harvard and Brown Students. [CSVDisplay Table](#)

What does seem to be the case is that the well-developed, historically evolved, battle-tested *official* versions of how elite universities do admissions has become for the students a taken-for-granted *doxa* (Bourdieu 1977) – the “natural” way for admissions to be conducted. This is stunning! There is enormous overlap between statements of Deans of Admissions (as per Warikoo but also as reported many times in the press) or FAQs on an institution's website and the students' understandings of how applicants are evaluated. What Warikoo calls “calibrated evaluations of merit” speaks to the institutions' claims about their holistic process – that they try to situate the students in the context of their local opportunities. My research on how Harvard conducted its admissions processes during the twentieth century (Karen 1990; Karen 1991; see also Karabel 2005 for additional evidence about Harvard, Yale, and Princeton) suggested that the university and admissions office worked very hard to develop descriptions of the process that sounded very fair, encouraged a broad applicant pool, and provided as much autonomy as possible for the admissions office. Harvard's contribution of *amicus* briefs to the Supreme Court in affirmative action cases reflects their desire not only to preserve diversity but the autonomy of their selection processes. As Harvard has sought to avoid the publicity attendant to the Jewish Problem in the 1920s or lawsuits of the sort they have dealt with more recently, their pronouncements about admissions have become more focused on a search for excellence of all

sorts, leaving opaque both the degree to which the individual is subjected to calibrated evaluations of merit and the degree to which the class as a whole reflects collective merit.

Warikoo doesn't explore what produced this overlap in her interviews but she makes the obvious point that the students have done a lot of research on the admissions process and, over time, they have "internalized the language of their administrators". As the institutions struggle to develop an ostensibly fair, meritocratic admissions process that reflects the various internal and external pressures on them (alumni, athletic coaches, faculty, musical directors, etc.), they articulate a vision that is consistent with upper-middle class aspirations for the future. The vision is reflected in the diversity bargain that Warikoo discovers. The diversity bargain has white students accepting a calibrated version of meritocracy so that they can benefit from the *collective merit* of the admitted students. This collective merit reflects the diversity of the admitted students and foreshadows the kinds of organizations that the selective institution graduates hope to inhabit for most of their work lives.

My explanation for this alignment goes far beyond Warikoo's empirical investigation. It situates the students and the institutions in a world that encourages certain kinds of elite behaviours and produces an opportunity structure that encourages aspirations for particular destinations. Indeed, one could argue that the similarity in race frames between Harvard and Brown might, indeed, reflect the prior, broader race ideologies that the interviewees developed growing up. They would have learned the outlines of the diversity bargain and the intricacies of the admissions process as they navigated the serpentine path through high school's extracurricular activities, theatre and music opportunities, and athletic teams. The long-term crucible of the admissions process will have imprinted these students with a particular perception of the range of possibilities for their futures and to have aligned their ideologies and aspirations accordingly. From a Bourdieusian perspective, the students' orientations towards a particular form of distinction – through elite colleges into the upper reaches of the class structure – are rooted in the habitus that originated in their class of origin (specifically, their particular location in the distribution of economic, cultural, and social capital) and was developed and refined along the way (Bourdieu 1984). Certainly, the intensity of the competitive admissions process over the last two decades or so has channelled these perceptions and aspirations even more powerfully than in the past. So, Warikoo's findings at Harvard and Brown might not only not reflect the day-to-day practices of those institutions but might be a function of growing up in the particular milieu that they inhabited on their way to Harvard and Brown. As Warikoo implies, there's a deeper patterning to the particular class and race learning that the elite white students want: she speculates that "they may be less inclined to learn ... from minorities who dropped out of high school" (61).

The institutionalization of an admissions process that provides relative autonomy for the selectors and reinforcement of the students' perceptions of their future opportunities is a major win – *in terms of stability* – for the institutions and, indeed, for the society at large. One could argue that had Warikoo been able to survey the students before they arrived on campus, she would have found a group that saw their attendance and eventual graduation from an elite institution as consistent with and reinforcing a habitus that had been developing towards this point for a very long time. Though, obviously, there would be variations in habitus by class and race/ethnicity, the modal upper-middle class student would have been developing her/his race

ideology and frame and perception of the opportunity structure for a very long time. Their arrival on campus and exposure to the somewhat varied approaches to race would largely lead them to appreciate further their college situation (and its reflection of collective merit) and reinforce their aspirations for an occupational future that would be racially/ethnically/globally diverse. By focusing on these “winners”, Warikoo might have chosen those most catholic in their orientations to diversity and who have the most confidence in how they can convert their capitals down the road.

My final point has to do with Warikoo’s concluding arguments about fairness, legitimacy, and selective college admissions. This is where she elaborates a vision for how we should think about race and merit in the context of an inclusive democracy. Let me briefly summarize her vision – there are three elements: 1. Define meritocracy in terms of expanding opportunity. There should be race, class, and, perhaps, other kinds of affirmative action so as to ensure that students from weaker academic backgrounds are supported. 2. Affirmative action and race have to be framed in terms of U.S. racial history. Affirmative action has to be seen not just as something that produces diversity – collective merit that the white students can benefit from – but as something that is focused on racial equality (a departure from current judicial interpretation). She is very optimistic that college campuses can be a site for various kinds of race education – whether integrative, social justice oriented, or through “intergroup dialog”. All of these provide students and the larger society a language and even a grammar to discuss race and fairness. 3. Meritocracy has to be understood as oriented towards equal opportunity but that it is associated with unequal outcomes. So, Warikoo reasons, if the whole admissions process is seen in terms of merit and the meritorious FEEL they EARNED their place – then the whole system gets a legitimization boost that is undeserved. Warikoo suggests, therefore, that selective universities should do a thought experiment: they should scrap meritocracy and go with an admissions lottery.

Prior to this thought experiment, three important points should be noted:

1. If there weren’t so much inequality in the society, this whole issue would be less consequential. What if there were relatively equal educational opportunities in the pre-college years? And, what if one could pursue one’s life dreams to be an actor or a mechanic or nuclear physicist and not worry about one’s basic necessities? In this situation, people might go to Brown or Harvard or Oxford or a community college because they wanted to learn about ethical dilemmas raised by new reproductive technologies or some such ... or they could study nuclear physics ... but their credential would not be the difference between a comfortable life and penury.
2. Barry Schwartz (2015), in advocating for a lottery for selective universities said: “Any honest admissions dean will tell you that the current system already is a lottery. Only now, it’s disguised as a meritocracy.” And
3. In my own work on Harvard admissions (Karen 1991), I focused on what factors led to different probabilities of admission (including race, legacy, athletics, etc.) and I found strong effects. What I didn’t focus on was all the unexplained variance in my regression equations. Even after including the final overall ratings of the readers of the folders, I still could only explain fifty per cent of the variance in probability of admission. So, yes,

different factors mattered but Schwartz is right – we’re talking close to a lottery already!! But it IS disguised as a meritocracy and that’s the problem.

To think more concretely about this lottery, we would need to start with defining the eligible pool. Warikoo wants immediately to get rid of two types of affirmative action that elite institutions currently use: for legacies and for athletes. I have very little concern about eliminating legacy preferences but with athletics, we’re talking about some serious institutional commitments. Are we also willing to forego the talented actors, singers, and cellists in the applicant pool? Do we want to privilege those uses of the body over other uses of the body? Athletics is a major part of the budgets of selective universities around the country and the basketball or football coach is often by far the most well-compensated employee. On the other hand, based on recent reports from men’s elite college athletic teams, maybe ridding colleges of its athletes is a means of lowering the prevalence of at least some of the racist and misogynist attitudes on campus.

Warikoo gives us some hints for how we might proceed – use calibrated GPA/SAT by class, by race, by zip code ... How would we determine the percentage of the class from each category? Should the class be twenty per cent from each income quintile? If we are really interested in expanding opportunity, we would get twenty per cent of each *wealth*quintile. Should each group that is admitted reflect the percentage of eighteen-year olds in the country from each given group? One would imagine, after the lottery idea became properly publicized, that the applicant pool would reflect those percentages.

If we’re interested in expanding opportunity, should we simply choose the lowest SAT scores of previously admitted students as the cutoff point? How should these be calibrated with race and class? What role should extracurricular activities play? What role should having been employed at some lousy job play (especially, if it’s a LOT of hours)? What role should caring for a parent/sibling/grandparent play? What if the applicant’s extracurricular activities exhibit incredible leadership (initiated and ran many successful organizations)? What if the applicant’s activities were all about empathy in some way? Would such considerations be off the table? Are selective universities willing to forego the talents of the high SAT scorers? Or the high GPAers? Would the faculty accept that there will be so many fewer 800 scorers and 4.0 GPAers in the class? In the late 1950s, there was a faculty revolt at Harvard focused on eliminating so many of the not very bright legacies and to use academic merit as a much more important factor in determining admission. If selective universities didn’t rely as much on academic merit, how would that change the role of these institutions as students graduate and apply to graduate/professional school?

Maybe we have to think much more about stratification within higher education. Are there ways of creating more institutions that can serve more students in a way that would serve the students’ and the society’s needs? If, as Warikoo suggests, we wish to pursue a kind of civic inclusion, maybe we need to have many more institutions offering, if not equal, then equivalent educational experiences. Maybe we have to think about divvying up Harvard’s \$35.7B endowment ... because THAT’S NOT FAIR!

Acknowledgements

I'd like to thank Jerry Karabel, Joshua Klugman, Katherine McClelland, and David Swartz for their comments on a previous draft.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Notes

1 At Harvard, there were nine Black and Latino students in the sample and six Asian-Americans. At Brown, there were eight Black and Latino students and seven Asian-American. In Appendix A, Warikoo provides individual-level data about each respondent. It is sometimes difficult to discern the race/ethnicity of each sample member, as the self-reported race/ethnicity of the interviewee differs somewhat from Warikoo's usage. For example, there were two "Chinese" students in the Harvard sample; the reader must assume that they are Asian-American.

2 Warikoo suggests a kind of layering on page 60.

3 Calculated from the tables in Appendix A (203–209).

4 I might ask in addition, are there other non-race-based types of diversity the students would be willing to bargain for?

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